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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 001912

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER ANURA BANDARANAIKE ON "WHEN RANIL WINS".... NOT "IF"

REF: COLOMBO 1868

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) When I met Foreign Minister Anura Bandaranaike on October 28 (reftel), he said that he wanted to get together before the Presidential election for a one-on-one chat, "without all these people (pointing to the notetakers) around." On November 7 we had that meeting over lunch at his official residence. In a quite extraordinary series of utterances, Anura said that:

--Ranil Wickremasinghe is now establishing a clear lead in the Presidential race and seems to be ahead of Mahinda Rajapakse by about five percentage points.

--President (and Anura's sister) Chandrika Kumaratunga has agreed with Ranil that when (not "if") Ranil wins, they will work towards establishing a national government in which the UNP and SLFP work together on a common platform.

--After his projected victory, Ranil will replace some, but not all, of the current cabinet. Anura will keep his post as Foreign Minister.

--Ranil will allow Chandrika to remain as President until a planned send-off by the armed forces on Nov 22 or 23. She will then depart immediately for London.

--Shortly thereafter, Ranil will dissolve Parliament and call for fresh elections. Chandrika will return to Sri Lanka to lead the SLFP campaign--of course without the JVP. Turncoats like Mahinda Rajapakse and his campaign manager Mangala Samaraweera will be put in their place.

--After the Parliamentary election, which Ranil's UNP will win, a national government will be formed to pursue peace and economic reform.

¶12. (C) Anura said that he had briefed this scenario to the Indian High Commissioner because they wanted to have Indian support. He was now telling me for the same reason. I responded that we were not taking sides in the election, that we would attempt to work with whatever government was elected, but that our ability to do so would be determined by the policies that government followed. We certainly hoped to be able to work together on our shared goals of peace and prosperity.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: Anura's extraordinary comments made it clear that he and President Kumaratunga are hoping for a Ranil victory--and at this point they seem fairly confident that will happen. He has a rosy scenario for developments after that. Given the bitter personal rivalry between Ranil and Chandrika, we are not so sure that would work out as planned. Still, it could be the beginning of that elusive "Southern consensus," the lack of which has stalled the peace process for so long. But of course it all depends on Ranil's winning the election. Our own unscientific view is that Ranil may in fact be establishing a lead--but the race is far too close to call.

LUNSTEAD